Promoting Self-Care and Work-Life Balance Among Practitioners in Higher Education

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Abstract

Given the changing landscape in higher education, education practitioners are faced with increasing workloads, which in turn is causing an increase in stress-related factors that impede health and wellness, and thus productivity. In response, practitioners in modern higher education settings must adopt a commitment to self-care that focuses on the body, mind, and emotions, along with a healthy work-life balance, in order to not succumb to the negative impacts of stress in the workplace. In this article, we define various types of stress and related impacts; identify common stressors in the workplace; suggest strategies to enhance self-care and work-life balance; and summarize implications for practitioners in higher education.

Keywords: stress, self-care, work-life balance, higher education practitioner

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Occupations in higher education have historically been regarded as low-stress jobs (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, & Stough, 2001). However, due to recent shifts in the educational landscape—which include more emphasis being put on productivity, greater barriers to promotion, and an increase in workload due to budget cuts (Paduraru, 2014)—more demands are being placed on practitioners in higher education. These increased demands result in what Gillespie et al. (2001) called task overload, which can lead to a work-life imbalance and practitioners feeling fatigued (Paduraru, 2014).

Various factors contribute to task overload, such as introduction to new technology, inability to take breaks, unrealistic deadlines, difficulty meeting research goals, and additional administrative duties (Gillespie et al., 2001). These demands can be overwhelming and can cause practitioners to sacrifice their well-being as they attempt to meet increasing expectations. The purpose of this paper is to explore (a) various types of stress and related impacts, (b) common stressors in the workplace, (c) strategies to enhance self-care and work-life balance, and (d) implications for practitioners in higher education.

Types of Stress and Related Impacts

According to Lazarus (1966), people experience stress when they perceive that they are unable to cope with the pressures of life and their well-being is threatened. Unfortunately, as Bachkirova (2012) noted, "work-related stress continues to be a serious issue worldwide in spite of an expanding body of research into this issue" (p. 49). More emphasis needs to be placed on helping employees deal with stress. However, it is important to understand the types of stress in order to develop strategies for dealing with it.

According to the American Psychological Association (n.d.), and based on the work of Miller and Smith (1994), there are three common types of stress:

- Acute stress:
  - Is the most common type and experienced by everyone.
  - Resolves itself within a day or two.
  - Is typically manageable and requires no intervention.
- Episodic acute stress:
  - Is frequent and builds up in the body.
  - May consist of a constant sense of worrying.
  - Causes physical, mental, and emotional symptoms that are difficult to alleviate.
- Chronic stress:
  - Produces considerable physical, psychological, and emotional distress.
  - Is a normal reaction to abnormal events.
  - Is created when a person does not see a way out of a horrible situation.

The different types of stress impact a person's mind, body, emotions, and behavior. To illustrate the impact of stress on the body, in 1936 Hans Selye created the stress model, called the general adaptation syndrome (Nursing Theories, 2011). The model consists of three stages of stress response. Stage one is alarm reaction, which is the fight or flight response that causes the body to be ready for physical activity. When the body is under this type of stress, the effectiveness of the immune system decreases, which makes the body susceptible to illness. The second stage is resistance. Within this stage, the body adapts to the stressors to which it is being exposed. The body remains in an alert state, and a person may notice an increase in heart rate, blood pressure, and heavy breathing. Stage three is the exhaustion stage, in which the body's resistance may be reduced or collapsed quickly due to prolonged stress. People who experience long-term stress may be more prone to heart attacks, severe infections, and chronic pain or illness (Nursing Theories, 2011).

Visotskaya, Cherkashina, Katcin, and Lisina (2015) discussed the various symptoms related to stress. Cognitive symptoms include problems with memory, inability to concentrate, poor judgement, seeing only the negative in situations, racing thoughts, and a constant sense of worry. Behavioral symptoms involve being accident prone, forgetfulness, neglect in appearance, and increasing absenteeism. Finally, emotional symptoms include loss of confidence, depression, apprehension, moodiness, and feeling overwhelmed. All of these symptoms can have a negative impact on work performance.

Common Workplace Stressors in Higher Education

The literature reveals common stressors found in the workplace, including a lack of funding to support projects, work overload, poor management, lack of recognition and acknowledgement of work, and low wages related to discrepancies between income and workload or between income and quality of professional training (Bachkirova, 2012; Gillespie et al., 2001; Paduraru, 2014; Shin & Jung, 2014). In a study by Gillespie et al. (2001), higher education practitioners, both faculty and staff, reported increased work-related responsibilities as a major source of stress. Moreover, feedback on performance, especially related to additional responsibilities, may be limited, causing an additional stressor for adult practitioners in higher education. In a more

recent study, Paduraru (2014) focused on higher education professors and found that the highest-rated sources of work-related stress were low wages, work-life imbalance due to lack of free time outside of work, fatigue, extreme emphasis on productivity at the expense of teaching, and challenges with being promoted. Although more research is needed to better understand the major causes of stress among practitioners in higher education, as well as available resources to support those dealing with too much stress (Gillespie et al., 2001), some research has focused on developing recommendations for promoting self-care and work-life balance, as discussed in the next section.

Strategies to Promote Self-Care and Work-Life Balance

Due to the increasing demands that practitioners are facing in higher education, institutions need to promote self-care and work-life balance for educators to thrive. According to the literature, best practices for promoting self-care in the higher education workplace include:
- Acknowledging the stressors in the workplace that are impacting practitioners (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994).
- Identifying a healthy support system and utilizing the system (Anitha & Sritharan, 2014; Gillespie et al., 2001).
- Setting healthy boundaries in all areas of life and saying no when needed (Anitha & Sritharan, 2014).
- Giving oneself permission to make mistakes and ask what was learned from the mistakes (Anitha & Sritharan, 2014).
- Seeking mental health support when needed (Anitha & Sritharan, 2014).
- Learning healthy strategies to let go of things that are out of one's control (Gillespie et al., 2001).
- Prioritizing items that must be completed and tackling one thing at a time (Anitha & Sritharan, 2014).

Implications for Higher Education Practitioners

Practitioners in modern higher education settings must adopt a commitment to self-care that focuses on the body, mind, and emotions, along with a healthy work-life balance. Concurrently, organizational leaders must support that commitment in the workplace by implementing preventative interventions that support practitioners through an individual and/or organizational approach (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994). As Quick and Henderson (2016) noted, "Defense against the adverse outcomes of occupational stress begins at the organizational level" (p. 5), and the organization must identify the stressors and risk factors that are keeping practitioners from thriving in the workplace. Organizational leaders should focus on three components to support everyone in the system: (a) facilitating collaboration among stakeholders to ensure that the well-being of employees is being addressed, (b) having systems in place to identify the warning signs of stress, and (c) offering preventative programs to support everyone in the organization (Quick & Henderson, 2016). Examples of stress-reducing resources that may be available to practitioners in higher education settings are fitness centers and physical fitness incentives and programs (Quick & Henderson, 2016).

Preventative stress management at the individual level is also crucial. Quick and Henderson (2016) discussed the importance of primary prevention versus secondary prevention for managing stress at the individual level. Primary prevention involves practitioners having a good support system in place to nurture and support them during critical times. Secondary prevention involves practitioners employing strategies to decrease general stress-induced feelings and emotions related to demanding situations (e.g., exercising regularly).

Conclusion

As adult practitioners in higher education, we should promote awareness of the importance of self-care and recognize that it is essential in our journey to wellness, wholeness, and operating with a sense of grounded purpose in the world (Shelton, 2011; Murphy, 2011; Trudeau, 2011). This can happen by dealing with stress using a preventative approach that includes having coping strategies in place to encourage overall wellness (Anitha & Sritharan, 2014; Cooper & Cartwright, 1994). It is vital that we advocate for ourselves as practitioners and promote the importance of self-care and work-life balance in the stressful landscape of the 21st-century higher education workplace.

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